

The Uniqueness of Christ in the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism: Challenges and Pastoral Solutions

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The Mystery of Christ has been made into a problem in theological discourses, inter-religious dialogues and even for a harmonious living among the people of different cultures and ideologies. Often what does not occur to some believers in Jesus Christ is that God's dwelling among humans as a human in space and time does not make God an object of even theological investigation. Certainly, we can speak about God's revelation about himself in the cosmos and in history and above all, his self-revelation in history by being with us as a human. It is even possible to speculate about it. Therefore, Christological reflections are legitimate. However, the mystery of Christ is beyond all speculations. For some even the question of 'uniqueness of Christ' itself is an affront to the mystery of Christ which cannot fall into the category of any individuation or comparison. One can only grow in faith in the realization that he or she belongs to mystery of Christ which surpasses all human understanding and categories of expression. No explanation about Christ can exhaust the mystery of Christ. One can only surrender to this sublime and ineffable Mystery and realize in the course of one's journey of life that he or she is a unique dimension of the Reality of Christ rather than speculating about the uniqueness of Christ. Only possible response to this grace of realizing that one belongs to mystery of Christ is worship in its true sense. However, a believer in Christ cannot escape the questions about him raised by those who have not encountered Jesus Christ.

In the context of Asia where there are so many religions as well as so many poor people, questions are often raised about the person and mission of Jesus Christ. On the one hand the Christological reflection cannot be separated from the actual life-situation of the people but on the other hand one must overcome the tendency of a crypto-nestorianism that separates humanity and divinity in Christ and makes him only a liberator of the people from socio-political, cultural and religious oppression and discrimination. The understanding of uniqueness of Christ in the Western world which is predominantly Christian is different from the understanding of the uniqueness of Christ in the Asian context. In Asia, any discussion about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the context of a plurality of religions would reduce the Person of Christ into any one of founders of a religion or a great religious teacher of moral precepts. How does it happen? We are articulating our Christic experience in a category of thought which may be meaningful in the Western world-view, but does not convey the same meaning in another world-view. A typical

example of such a difference in the understanding of a truth due to the difference of the world-views is the expression 'the uniqueness of Christ'. A Christian believer experiences Christ as the absolute meaning or the beginning and the end of his or her life. However, if this experience is expressed in the category of *uniqueness*, it not only obscures the content of this experience but also conveys the opposite of what is intended by this confessional statement. In fact, there is nothing that can be compared or contrasted with the reality of Christ. But when this faith-experience is translated into a world-view different from its original articulation it distorts the content and meaning of the originary experience. No argument or explanation can change a world-view. Only genuine dialogue with openness to the Spirit of Truth can lead the partners in dialogue to have some insights that go beyond the understanding. Therefore, in sharing the Christian experience of Christ, what theology understands by the expression *uniqueness of Christ* needs to be communicated with a pastoral concern and commitment to Truth.

What a Christian believer understands by the so called uniqueness of Christ may be communicated to those who do not share the Christian world-view as the experience of Jesus as the absolute meaning of one's life. The quest for meaning is universal. In this context the question often raised is 'What is the absolute significance or meaning of human existence?' Someone or something cannot give absolute meaning and significance to human existence if it is not of infinite and absolute value. It cannot be anything other than the infinite Other, God himself. Humans can discover themselves, the meaning or significance of their lives only by referring to the source and destiny of their lives. In their discovery of themselves they discover who God is. In this process humans can discover, though they may not always, that they belong to the mystery of God. Though distinct from themselves they are not separate from God. He is not then the absolute Other, the God of the philosophers but the God of relationship because "in him we move, live and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

1. Identifying and Recognizing Christ in Asia

How is Jesus Christ recognized and known in the Asian context of religious pluralism? How would one distinguish him from other gods, goddesses and founders of religions? Here, the question is about his identification in the Asian context. In the past the Western missionaries dismissed the worship of different gods and goddesses by Hindus and others as a pernicious superstition, a horrendous worship of devils, a blatant idolatry or the affirmation of an untenable pantheistic belief system. They hoped that it would slowly fade away with the advent of Western education and eventual secularization of the society. They affirmed that all these mythological divine figures would disappear with the passage of time when the believers realize that a god with an elephant-head or a monkey-head and thousands of such manifestations could not have existed in reality but only in the fertile imagination of those who have created them. But they are all there with a wider acceptance and a stronger appeal even among the educated classes. They are

worshipped with festive celebrations, pilgrimages, special prayers, fasting and other religious observances. Do such practices and the belief behind such practices tell us something about religious attitude of the people? Doesn't it indicate that there is a different type of spirituality, not based on spatio-temporal symbols and representations however bizarre they may appear to be. Due to its irrational and superstitious external expressions this popular religiosity may be dismissed by others who do not share the world-view of this people. It would indicate that for a large majority of the people of Asia, whatever is externally seen in the sphere of religion whether mythical or historical would not make much difference as long as it is a medium of entering into communion with the Absolute or God who is beyond such forms or names and is affirmed by using their own genius by those who are real seekers of the Truth.

People have the innate need to be connected to everything that transcends them especially with the absolute reality which they acknowledge as the One beyond name and form. Therefore, whatever be the form through which one establishes this relationship is unimportant, but they realize the need to be related to this reality is important. Where is the place of Jesus Christ in the pluralistic religious context of Asia? Is he like Rama or Krishna, the incarnated appearances or *avatars* of Vishnu in Hinduism? Or is he like those historical founders of religions like the ascetic Mahavira or the Buddha, the enlightened one with a prophetic mission? Or a prophet who revealed God's will like Mohammed? The Christian answer would be an emphatic, "No."

The Christian proclamation claims that Jesus Christ cannot be compared with any of the gods of the Hindus or with the Buddha, the enlightened or with Mohammed, the prophet. Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God. He is the Lord. He lived and died at a particular time and place. He was the expected Messiah. He saved humans from sin and meaningless death by his own death on the cross and by his resurrection. He is the only mediator and saviour. All these faith affirmations and historical facts are absolutely clear to a Christian believer. But all these identifications of Jesus Christ and faith affirmations would not be meaningful to those who do not share the Judeo-Christian view of God, humans and the world. Some would respect this view of the Christians; sometimes they may even be sympathetic to the Christian claims. But some have real theological, epistemological or ideological problems with the Christian claim.

For people who are convinced of such an understanding of mystery of God, even a historical reality, however unique it is, as the self-revelation of God in history as in the case of Jesus Christ, would be one among many revelations of God. The Western theology's obsession with the historicity of God's self-revelation or oft repeated affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ would not be intelligible to the Asian religious mind. The content of the faith-affirmation in the uniqueness of Christ needs to be expressed in another language and idiom.

It is a serious theological problem, for example, for the Hindu mind when Jesus Christ who is a particular historical person is proclaimed to be the only Saviour and God. For the Hindu view of reality it is not a "folly" to proclaim a historical person as Lord and God or Son of God. They would affirm that there were many such persons and each one of them had a particular and unique message to give. It is the exclusive claim that Jesus is the only Saviour and Lord that would not find an echo in the Hindu mind. Moreover, the over emphasis on the historical existence of Jesus Christ as if the historical dimension were to be the only important dimension of reality is not acceptable to those who hold that the spatio-temporal existence, perhaps, is the least aspect of the whole of Reality. In other words, whatever is real need not necessarily be historical. Such a notion is not alien to the Christian world-view as certain fundamental Christian faith-affirmations are based on the real but not on historical facts. Further, the belief in a God, who can relate to humans only after the historical reality of Jesus on earth and only with those who believe in him, seem to be partisan, exclusive and unconcerned about millions and millions of humans who may never come to believe in him.

There are both epistemological and ideological problems connected with the understanding and proclamation of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Asian context of religious pluralism. The epistemological problem consists in attributing universality to something particular and historically limited. Jesus Christ, as presented by the traditional Christian proclamation, cannot claim any universality because he is presented as a tribal God or sectarian God, who seems to exclude all who have other names for the Ultimate reality whom he claims to reveal. The ideological problem connected with the understanding the person and mission of Jesus Christ is that he is brought by the colonial powers that oppressed the people, destroyed their national identity and violated their sovereignty and robbed them of their wealth. The image of Christ as the Lord and God of the ruthless colonizers naturally would not appeal to those who seek liberation not only the liberation of their own selves but also from socio-economic and political oppression.

The believers in Christ insist on his particularity and uniqueness that distinguishes him from other saviours and mediators. But in the process they have made him one of the incarnations who is to be approached by cult and rituals and other religious observances similar to those followed by people who believe in the gods and the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Therefore, Jesus Christ of the Christian proclamation does not challenge the listeners to make a radical decision to encounter him and experience their own liberation and the transformation their society. For them he is the Christian God, one among many.

An identification of Jesus is necessary but it should not be the repetition of those symbols and images of identification emerged in a particular cultural context which would not be meaningful in the Asian context. The creative commitment to Jesus' tradition is to discover in the Asian context those symbols and thought patterns

that would reveal the real identity of Jesus Christ that they can encounter him and discover the mystery of their own being in relation with him and in solidarity with others and with the world.

III Christic Identity in the Asian Context

A meaningful faith-affirmation and proclamation of Christ in the Asian context must be the one that articulates the Christic identity in a way that is intelligible, challenging and decisive for the seekers of Truth. Then they encounter Jesus Christ as the beginning and of their lives. When the mystery of Christ is thus encountered as the meaning of their lives they would find the meaning of human existence in the world offering them a transforming and joyful insight into the mystery of their own being in relation to other humans, God and the world.

The NT witness gives a deep insight into the fact that the proclamation of Jesus cannot be and should not be limited to his historical identification but an identity that transcends historical limitations. Yet it should not exclude the historical dimension of Christ's existence. This mode of existence which connects the historical and transhistorical is not something unfamiliar to the Christian tradition. The traditional Christian world-view and Christian anthropology speak of a continued existence of humans that transcends historical existence but determined by it. Human existence begins in history but goes beyond it. This mode of existence includes a transformed historical existence beyond the ordinary existence in history. For this, I have no other term that expresses it other than an apparently contradictory term *inclusive transcendence*. The Christian faith-affirmation of the Christic identity includes the pre-existence of the Word, its historical existence and its trans-historical existence. There are various instances of such a Christic identity in the New Testament as *inclusive transcendence*, for example, the apostolic encounter with Jesus in his historical existence as well as with Jesus' trans-historical mode of being as the Risen Lord, Paul's encounter with the resurrected and yet suffering Christ, the cosmic Christology of Paul and the Logos Christology of John. They all refer to the whole reality of Christ, namely, his pre-existence, historical existence and trans-historical continued existence articulated in the Christian confession, "Jesus Christ is same, yesterday, today and for ever" (Heb 13:8).

While the reality of Christ transcends space and time it includes the historical dimension of Jesus Christ which was limited by space and time. The question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ may be discussed with regard to the identification of Jesus Christ because he was also a historical existence but it cannot be applied to his entire reality that includes but transcends space and time. Therefore his true identity brought into the question of his uniqueness.

R. Panikkar has convincingly shown that a mere identification of Jesus would make him only one of the founders of religion, a "remarkable Jewish teacher, who had the fortune or misfortune of being put to death rather young".¹ The identity of

Jesus Christ is the living Christ who is encountered and the Mystery in which one is involved, the Mystery that is encountered as the bond of everything Divine, Human and Cosmic, without separation, division or confusion but distinct and different from one another. But this Jesus Christ is not an a-personal principle. "The Christ that 'sits at the right hand of the Father', is the first-born of the universe, born of Mary: he is Bread as well as the hungry, naked, or imprisoned." ²

To recognize this identity of Christ is both a grace and a task. When he is encountered as the only mediator of everything human, divine and material, each human being is given a insight into the mystery of his or her own being. In this mystery of Christ one is called to become what he or she really is. Then everything and everyone is recognized as a *Christophany*, a manifestation of the reality of Christ. In this insight lies, perhaps, the deepest meaning of the Eucharist, the greatest Sacrament of communion where God, human and the world, the Absolute and the relative, the Infinite and finite historical and trans-historical, material and spiritual unite without losing the distinction and difference of each but inextricably united to one another. Such an understanding of the Christic identity challenges the one who is committed to Christ to be responsible for one's own unfolding as a person in radical relationship to others, struggling with others to create situations where humans can authentically become humans, to be responsible for the entire creation, to be open to celebrate plurality and embrace everything that 'God has cleansed' (Acts 10:1.5).

Therefore it is imperative for Christology to re-capture the NT witness to the whole Christ, the insights of the Patristic theology of Trinity and Christology and the *advaitic* intuition to articulate the universal significance of Jesus Christ challenging to encounter into the mystery of his identity. This can meaningfully explain his presence in everyone who is searching for meaning of the mystery of their being and in everything that is eagerly waits for liberation.

3. Pastoral Solutions to the Challenges of the Meaning of Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism.

In the context of many religions in Asia that claim to be ways of liberation from the misery of human existence, the Christian claim of the uniqueness of Christ as saviour from a phenomenological perspective would be considered by the people of other religions as an untenable, exclusivistic, arrogant and triumphalistic position. A theological approach to the question of uniqueness stating that Christ is *the only saviour* and an implicit affirmation that the membership of the Church is necessary for salvation would create enormous problems for dialogue with other religions which would consider Christ one among many saviours and mediators as well as the Church as a sociological entity. Therefore, it is important to for a Christian disciple to communicate the mystery of Christ from his or her experience of the Christic identity which transcends the question about the

uniqueness of Christ whether it is approached from a phenomenological, historical or theological perspective.

The gift of faith in Christ is a transforming experience that radically changes one's understanding of God, humans and the world. Paul's encounter with the risen and yet suffering Christ on the road to Damascus was such a transforming experience that changed his world-view radically. His understanding of God, religion, human beings, world and his own existence was changed in such a way that nothing mattered to him except Christ, the pre-existent, the crucified, the risen, the cosmic and the eschatological. He experienced every dimension of the reality in its newness hitherto unknown to him. He saw himself and those who encountered Christ and was transformed a new creation in Christ (II Cor 5:17) What he proclaimed in his ministry was the reality of Christ he encountered and continued to experience and what was handed over to him about Jesus Christ by those who encountered both the historical Jesus and the same as the risen Christ. Paul preached this Christ as 'the power of God and wisdom of God' though if objectively seen the crucified one would be, as he said, 'a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles' (1 Cor 1: 18-22).

A pastoral approach in communicating the Mystery of Christ in the context of the plurality of religions in Asia is to share about the *newness* of God's revelation in and through Jesus Christ rather than his uniqueness which does not convey the meaning of the reality of Christ. Therefore, it is important to proclaim what is *new* about the person and message of Jesus Christ. This *newness* must be communicated through meaningful words, actions and life-style rather than repeating terms which are unintelligible, exclusive and offensive to the people of other religions. The whole of apostolic witness and praxis was about the newness of God's action in history in the person of Jesus Christ that it became the *New Testament*. The covenantal relationship God established through him was interpreted and proclaimed as the *New Covenant*. Till the establishment of the *new heaven* and *new earth* this new message has to be proclaimed. Unlike the exclusive and univocal terms that we prefer to use to explain who Jesus Christ is, the challenging newness of Jesus Christ, if properly communicated, can bring many to encounter him.

Can we identify some of the elements that can communicate the *newness* of God's revelation in Jesus Christ that can adequately respond to the soteriological concerns of the people of other religions, their quest for integral liberation and their longing for harmony among humans, God and cosmos? I believe that it is possible and necessary in order to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the people of other religions and to invite them to experience Jesus Christ. Some of the elements of this *newness of Christic revelation* can be outlined as follows³:

1. In Jesus Christ one can encounter a self-emptying God, hitherto unknown in the history of revelation. In him the Absolute became relative, Infinite became

finite, God became human, Word became flesh (Jn 1:14). In him God came to serve and not to be served (Mk 10:45). Thus the self-emptying figure of Christ (Phil 2:7) can be encountered as the servant of everything perfect, good, true, beautiful and authentically liberative in all religious traditions whether Great or Little, Meta-cosmic or cosmic, unitive or messianic. He is not only the liberative potential of Asian religious traditions but has the power to actualise it in reality.

2. It must be a pastoral imperative to reveal to the people of other religions that the community of the disciples of Christ, the Church is a community that experienced the self-emptying Christ by its commitment to true ministry to the people of all religions and ideologies transcending the borders of the Christian community. If Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human as the Council of Chalcedon confesses and proclaims, he cannot but be what he revealed himself to be in history, the servant of God, humanity and the cosmos. In him is the self-disclosure of God that God is not only the Lord but also the servant of all and everything. This is the radical *kenosis*, the paradox of Christic revelation. "There is no other name" (Acts 4:12) that reveals this mystery of the God as a self-emptying God who becomes the servant of his own creation. The *newness* of Jesus Christ consists in his servanthood of everything authentically human, be it culture, religion, systems or structures. This self-emptying servanthood is expressed in the foot-washing of the disciples at the Last Supper (Jn 13:3-15). This revelation subverts all human categories of discrimination: superiority and inferiority, higher class and lower class, high caste, low caste and untouchable, patriarchalism and matriarchalism, male and female, Christian and Pagan, believers and non-believers, civilized and uncivilized etc. It challenges the religious and secular structures that perpetuate the systems of discrimination and dehumanisation and energizes the forces of liberation whether religious or secular.
3. The Christian community needs to live the self-emptying image of Jesus Christ. It should become really a Church of the poor which believes in the transforming power of Christ through his Spirit and lives it by empowering the powerless, entering into solidarity with them and energizing them to struggle for a fuller human life. The disciples of Christ need to share their experience of Christ who can liberate all people, whatever their religious beliefs may be, from the forces of alienation within themselves as well as within the structures and the systems which enslave them.
4. It is in the self-emptying community of the believers in Christ a new insight into mystery of God as a suffering God is revealed. God suffers when human suffer as he is absolute love itself. Love involves suffering. This new revelation

God in Jesus Christ has a tremendous influence on the people who suffer from oppressive images of God.

5. The Church through its committed and exemplary pastors, the faithful and through its institutions manifest the self-emptying Christ who can fulfill the longing of the Asian people for liberation from greed, acquisitiveness, egoism and the fragmentation of reality. He can reveal the necessity of an ethical religiosity for an integral liberation of the people transcending the exclusively cultic religiosity. Jesus Christ encountered by the community of the believers reveals a God who is not self-centered but human-centered. Therefore, the Church that is the sacrament of Christ, needs to fulfill Christ's prophetic function in the Asian context by challenging all the religious traditions including Christianity to be authentically anthropocentric and care for the whole creation.
6. The love of Christ must impel the Christian community to recognize and respond to the kenotic dimension of Christ in all that is authentically human wherever it is found. This Christ of their experience need to be shared as the one who can energize all those who encounter him to promote everything authentically human and liberative in the various religious traditions, cultures, and socio-political and economic systems. This faith-conviction is to be manifested by the community of the disciples of Christ or the Church by an attitude of respect, love and a kenotic loving service to all people, especially the poor and the marginalized. Thus, a possibility is opened to the people of other religions to encounter the kenotic Christ. The kenotic Christ of Christian experience would also empower the disciples to identify themselves with those who are committed to fight against the forces of unfreedom in order to build God's own Kingdom where the self-emptying of God is the source and model for communion and communities of justice, love, compassion, fellowship, peace, reconciliation and, indeed, wholeness. Thus, the mystery of Christ can be lived in the history of the struggles of the people of different religions and ideologies and a possibility is offered to all to encounter Christ and be transformed.

Conclusion:

The Christian faith-affirmation in the uniqueness of Christ for the salvation of humankind cannot be meaningfully and easily communicated in the Asian context of a multiplicity of religions which claim to be ways of salvation. The underlying faith-experience that is expressed in the confessional statement about the uniqueness of Christ needs to be articulated through a meaningful approach of the disciples of Christ to the people of various religions and cultures of Asia. Where a phenomenological and a theological approach may not only fail to communicate the truth about the Mystery of Christ but also may evoke negative attitudes and even a rejection of Christ by the people of other religions, a pastoral approach in communicating the mystery of Christ may be meaningful and effective.

The core of this pastoral approach in communicating what is meant by the expression 'uniqueness of Christ' is to live and share the experience of self-emptying God in and through Jesus Christ who reveals a God who becomes the servant of his own creation leading humans to unfold themselves as humans in freedom. The challenge to every disciple of Christ and the Church as a community is to witness to the kenotic Christ through its pastoral concern for the people of all religions by becoming truly the servant of the people as Christ did and through a radical commitment to integral liberation.

(Endnotes)

- 1 R. Panikkar, *A Christophany for our Times*, The Thirty-fifth Annual Robert Cardinal Bellarmine Lecture, *Theology Digest* 39:1 (1992), p. 4.
- 2 R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Bangalore: ATC Publ. 1982), p. 27
Ibid., p. 27-28
- 3 See J. Parappally, "The Challenging Newness of Jesus Christ in the Context of Religious Pluralism," in *Christologia e Missione oggi*, eds. G.Colzani, P.Gioglioni, S.Karotemprel (Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 20010, pp.117-127